

# Attitude Of Buddha On Human Dignity: An Overview

(Dr.) Vinay Kumar

Associate Professor, Department of History,  
A.N. S. College, Barh, Bihar, India

*Abstract: It is true that when we think of the Buddha, it is a picture of moral and spiritual perfection that appears before our mind. Buddha gave many instructions on how to train the mind to be happy and free from problems. His teachings are taken as pure spiritual instructions which reveal the supreme path to inner peace and happiness. Every living being has the same basic wish – to be happy and avoid suffering. We spend our whole life working hard to fulfill this wish. Since this world evolved, human beings have spent much time and energy improving external conditions in their search for happiness and a solution to their many problems. What has been the result? Instead of their wishes being fulfilled, human suffering has continued to increase, while the experience of happiness and peace is decreasing.*

*Modern man in his search for pleasure and affluence has exploited nature without any moral restraint to such an extent that nature has been rendered almost incapable of sustaining healthy life. Invaluable gifts of nature, such as air and water, have been polluted with severely disastrous consequences. Man is now searching for ways and means of overcoming the pollution problem as his health too is alarmingly threatened.*

*Buddhism strictly limits itself to the delineation of a way of life designed to eradicate human suffering. The Buddha refused to answer questions which did not directly or indirectly bear on the central problem of human suffering and its ending. In the present work I will examine the teachings of Buddha to see whether there is a noble path which leads a man to self-development and self purification. Then, I discuss how the Buddhist ideology analyses the root causes of the human problems and tackle them correctly, and endowed with the spirit of kindness, compassion, fraternity needed to build up a truly human being.*

*Keywords: Spiritual, Suffering, Teaching, Compassion, Self-purification*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human dignity is a key concern in any discussion of bioethics. It must be given full respect in all stages of life. Being able to concretely sense and experience one's own dignity, to have that recognized and respected, are crucial aspects of happiness. In Buddhism, the basis of human dignity is our identity with the universal, cosmic life, and our capacity to awaken to the wisdom and compassion inherent in all life. It is the fundamental nature of life to evolve toward self-realization and self-perfection. This remains true even for people with extremely reduced capacities. In this sense, human dignity is essentially independent of such standards as the ability to make rational decisions or to contribute actively to society.

In the modern age man has become alienated from himself and nature. When science started opening new vistas of knowledge revealing the secrets of nature one by one, man gradually lost faith in theistic religions. Consequently, he developed scanty respect for moral and spiritual values as well. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the acquisition of wealth, man has become more and more materialistic in his attitudes and values. The pursuit of sense pleasures and the acquisition of possessions have become ends in themselves.

Moreover, in his greed for more and more possessions he has adopted a violent and aggressive attitude towards nature. Forgetting that he is a part and parcel of nature, he exploits it with unrestrained greed, thus alienating himself from nature as well. The net result is the deterioration of man's physical and mental health.. These results remind us of the Buddhist

teachings in the Sutras, which maintain that the moral degeneration of man leads to the decrease of his life-span. Beside, Moral degeneration is a double-edged weapon, it exercises adverse effects on man's psycho-physical well being as well as on nature.

In order to resolve the question of human suffering, Buddha engaged in various meditative practices, entering deeply into the inner realms of his own life. There he discovered a consciousness that transcended the purely individual, a layer of consciousness shared by all people. Beyond that, he was able to experience unity with all forms of life. Eventually, the expansion of his inner awareness enabled him to experience oneness with the Earth itself, and with the planets and stars which, like the individual human being, undergo cycles of life and death—forming and coming together, dissolving and ceasing to be. Finally, he was able to experience the dimension of what can be called a universal or cosmic life—the fundamental essence of wisdom and compassion that supports and underlies all existence.

It was his awakening to this that earned Shakyamuni the title of “Buddha” or enlightened one. He discovered an inner, immanent truth that is at the same time transcendent and universal. The inner cosmos he discovered could, in other words, also be observed in the world around him; perceiving a universal life of wisdom and compassion within, Buddha also recognized it in all people. He saw that all people were as capable as he of awakening to the true nature of their lives. From that time, his actions and teachings were dedicated to the work of awakening all people to the eternal, undefiled nature of their lives. These teachings formed the core and basis for the later development of Buddhism into a philosophical system and a movement of popular empowerment.

The goal of Buddhism is happiness. Because Buddhism views all life as interconnected, our efforts to realize happiness for ourselves must include compassionate action for others. Buddhism denies the validity of any form of happiness that is built on the suffering or at the sacrifice of others, including wanton destruction of nature. In the early Buddhist scripture the *Dhammapada*, we find this passage: “All living beings tremble before violence. All living beings fear death. Placing yourself in the position of these other living beings, you must not kill others, nor must you allow them to kill others.” Thus protecting life from violence and degradation is a core objective of Buddhism.

Central to Buddha's awakening was his grasp of the eternal nature of life. In Buddhism, individual lives are seen as emerging from the universal, cosmic life (the process of birth) and returning to it in the process of death. Governed by the law of cause and effect, we repeat endless cycles of life and death, each of which is a unique opportunity to create happiness for ourselves and for others. In terms of the process of birth, Buddhism views parent and child as manifestations of cosmic life who share a profound connection from the past, as well as a shared purpose or mission to be realized in the present and future. At the other end of the life continuum, Buddhism views the process of dying as an invaluable opportunity to manifest one's human dignity fully. Because Buddhism does not view death as an intrinsically negative experience, it does not generally support the use of “heroic” interventions that only prolong the physical existence of a

patient. Nor, on the other hand, does it support any intervention that deliberately shortens a person's life.

Besides, Buddhism views consciousness as something not limited to such superficial aspects as sensation, perception and rational thought. Rather, it assumes the existence of deep layers of consciousness that are shared by and connect individuals and which are ultimately unified with all being. In this sense, the inner state of the individual is the key to the Buddhist idea of death with dignity. In the ideal Buddhism offers for the final stage of life, wisdom and compassion figure centrally.

It is a fact that, What are the humane qualities which give rise to dignity and nobility? They are based on the moral, ethical, intellectual and spiritual norms which we human beings uphold and treasure in our day-to-day relationships with one another. As human beings we have minds which we can develop to such an extent that we can differentiate between what is right and what is wrong, between what we should be proud of and what we should be ashamed of. It is in cherishing such values that we distinguish ourselves as human beings and not animals. The word ‘Manussa’ as indicated in our religious books, describes a human being as “one who can develop his mind”. To be able to develop one's mind means that one is able to develop and sustain one's thinking power which is the ability to judge between what is moral and immoral, what is good and what is bad and what is right and what is wrong. These are attributes within the grasp of human beings. It would appear that human beings are the only living beings that can develop their minds or their thinking power to such high levels.

There are now innumerable religious practices, customs, traditions, rites and rituals, offerings and prayers in all forms. While we pride ourselves as civilized human beings, we note with deep regret the behaviour and attitudes of some of our people which can be described as no better than those of animals. A human being who is worthy of respect, would be one who is kind, compassionate and sympathetic to others, who is afraid to cause harm to others but is ever prepared to lend a helping hand when in need. These are ordinary human values which we should all cherish and uphold. We should develop our humane qualities and not violate them. By being of service to others, we develop great virtues which are inherent in us. By being of service to others, we show a spirit of understanding, kindness, compassion, honesty, simplicity and gentleness.

Roughly speaking, these characteristics are divided into three aspects, our animal nature, our human nature and our divine nature. These three characteristics influence our behaviour in various degrees. If we give way to our animal nature without making any effort to subdue or control our ugly actions, we will become a liability to society. Religion, with the noble teachings coming from illustrious religious leaders, should serve as a guide for proper humane behaviour. By cultivating and improving our human nature, we ultimately achieve our divine goal – we attain our divine nature. By achieving divine nature, we achieve the level of development at which the base emotions of greed, lust, anger, hatred, jealousy, envy and other unwelcome attributes are completely eliminated, thus making the human being more noble and worthy of the highest respect.

Buddhism, in common with other religions, strives to eradicate all evil and works for the well-being of humanity. The main purpose of Buddhism is to encourage the moral and ethical development of the ordinary human being through mental training and conditioning so that the human mind can be a definite asset to the cause of humanity. Buddhism does not believe that a Buddhist can achieve his aims in life by the simple process of praying or worshipping, and making offerings and supplication to the Buddha. Buddhism teaches that a man must work hard for his own progress and advancement. He cannot expect good results from the mere act of praying for it – he must strive for it. According to the Buddha, the most valuable asset for a man is his ability to cultivate and nurture his mind to achieve wisdom.

The Buddha did not encourage his followers to rely on a third party to gain salvation. He has repeatedly stressed that enlightenment cannot be achieved through external agencies. We must work for it. We must use our own efforts, knowledge and understanding to experience it. The advice given by the Buddha in the “Kalama Sutta” indicated very clearly the extent to which the Buddha encouraged men to think for themselves and to value their human dignity. He said “Do not accept anything based upon mere report or tradition or hearsay; nor upon emotional reasons and arguments; nor upon one’s own inference; nor upon anything which appears to be true; nor upon one’s own speculative opinion; nor upon the consideration ‘this is our Teacher’. But when you know these things are good for you and for others, then accept them”. It was the Buddha who was willing to give credit to the human being as being capable of such rational thought.

## II. ANALYSIS

In traditional Indian thought, the soul, or *atman*, is an eternally existing spiritual substance or being and the abiding self that moves from one body to the next at rebirth. The Buddha rejected this concept. He taught that everything is impermanent (*anicca*), and this includes everything that we associate with being human: sensations, feelings, thoughts and consciousness. This is the doctrine of *anatta*, “no-soul,” a central concept of Buddhism. Human existence, in the Buddha’s view, is nothing more than a composite of five aggregates (*khandas*): Physical forms (*rupa*), Feelings or sensations (*vedana*), Ideations (*sanna*), Mental formations or dispositions (*sankhara*) and Consciousness (*vinnana*).

These *khandas* come together at birth to form a human person. A person is a “self” in that he or she is a true subject of moral action and karmic accumulation, but not in the sense that he or she has an enduring or unchanging soul. The doctrine of *Anatta*, when combined with Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation and karma, presents an interesting difficulty. If humans have no soul or enduring self, what is it that reincarnates? The Buddha was characteristically resistant to dwelling on such speculative matters, and early opponents of Buddhism were quick to point out this apparent vulnerability in Buddhist thought.

Besides, In explaining the teachings of the Buddha, certain people have unfortunately created a wrong impression that the Buddha had advised all His followers to give up all

worldly possessions and lead an unprofitable life without the necessity of either working or earning a living and without experiencing any form of worldly pleasure. On the other hand we must understand that renunciation is the most important aspect to have peace of mind. But that should be done through the realization of the fleeting nature of worldly pleasures. Instead of advising His followers to lead an inactive life without doing any form of work, the Buddha, in His discourse on the ‘Four Kinds of Happiness’ which man can experience, clearly indicated that man must work hard in order to acquire wealth and property to lead a happy Buddhist way of life. The first kind of happiness comes when a man, by his hard work, has managed to accumulate some wealth or landed property. The acquisition of such wealth and property, for the well-being of the family, is encouraged by the Buddha. This attitude gives the view that a man should not have worldly possessions. A second kind of happiness is the pleasurable experience gained by man in his ability to spend or make use of his hard-earned wealth for his own benefit and that of his family. The man enjoys life without in any way violating religious principles or causing harm to others. Of course when one decides to renounce the world and become a monk, then he gives up all his worldly possessions. But the Buddha did not suggest that ordinary laymen do the same thing. A third kind of happiness is the happiness experienced by a man who is completely free from debt. The Buddha also advised that a man must know how to adjust his expenditure in accordance with his income. A man should not be dependent on others for his daily sustenance – except in emergencies. The fourth kind of happiness, considered as the highest level of happiness, is the realization by a man that he has been able to earn and accumulate his wealth and property without in any way causing harm or injury to others. Such happiness is deemed by the Buddha to be a remarkable experience during this life or hereafter. These various types of happiness were described in certain discourses uttered by the Buddha in regard to the economic life of a man. Hence such views are definitely contrary to the misconceptions held that man should not lead a worldly life.

Moreover, The rules to develop human values in Buddhism are simple. One must work hard and be conscientious. One must not waste one’s time unnecessarily and doing nothing. One should not give lame excuses that either the day is too hot or too cold for the allotted work to be done. Be constructive and conscientious in whatever you do. During His forty five years of noble service to mankind, it was reputed that He only slept for a period of two hours each day. He travelled all over the country advising people how to lead a noble way of life. Knowing well that there are human frailties and shortcomings, the Buddha advised His followers to be careful in associating with people. One must associate with good people. Certain so-called friends are far from being friends – ever ready to cheat and swindle. The Buddha advised us to understand who our friends are. In associating with people, we must try to understand their character, temperament and mood. The Buddha does not advise us to torture our body or our mind in the cause of religion. We can practice our religion as rational beings. The teaching of the Buddha can be categorized in three ways: happiness for this

life, happiness for the hereafter and happiness for the ultimate achievement – Nibbana.

Buddha virtually stresses on humanism in his preaching. Several events of his personal life related to human approach are recorded in various discourses in different texts of the Pali Tripitaka. The social significance of his religion is that Buddha is in favour of the abolition of the existing social inequalities for the cause of social justice among the people. So he raises his voice to abolish the caste system in the society, Buddha says, “By birth is not one an outcast. By birth is not one a Brahmin. By deeds is one an outcast. By deeds is one a Brahmin”. Buddha believes that a man should be distinguished on the basis of their virtues and not on the supremacy of caste. He says “Just as, O monks, the great rivers such as the Ganges, the Yamuna, Aciravate, Sarabhu and Maci when they fall into the ocean lose their former names and clans are known as the ocean, even so do the four castes of Kshatriya, Brahmins, Vaisyas and Sudras, when they have gone forth in the Doctrine and Discipline taught by Tathagata, from a home to a homeless life, lose their former names and clans and are known as “Ascetic”. It is also stated that several people of the low-origin occupy important places in the Buddhist Sangha. Upali, the expounder of the Vinaya of the first Buddhist Council held at Rajagaha (modern Rajgir) was formerly a barber. Apart from him Sunita, who belongs to a family of lower-scavenger of Rajagaha. Sumangala born in a poor family in a hamlet of Savatthi (modern Saheth - Maheth near Balarampur. U.P). Abhaya-kamara is a son of courtesan of Padumavati of Ujjaini.

Buddha has compassionate humanism on women. So the place of women has been highlighted by him in different occasions. In his time women are not virtually held in a high esteem in the society. He says that they are quite capable of attaining sanctity and holiness. Sex is no barrier for purification in the eye of Buddha. He does not humiliate women. It is stated that when Amabapli a famous courtesan of Vesali (modern vaishali in Bihar) hears of Buddha's visit to Kotigama near vesali; she invites him and his disciples to a meal next day. Buddha accepts her invitation without any hesitation. Sometimes women is mentioned as “Matugam” and as a mother a woman holds honourable place in the fold of Buddha's religion, A wife is regarded paramasakha, the best friend of the husband. No doubt, initially Buddha refuses to allow the women into the order on certain reasonable ground. Subsequently he admitted the women into his order at the repeated request of Ananda. Who is known as Dhamma-bhandagarika, the treasurer of the Dhamma and Mahapajapati Gotami (step-mother of Gautama) Thus Bhikkhuni Sangha, the order of Nun has been founded. A considerable number of women of low-origin occupy prominent places in the order of nuns. Among them Capa, a daughter of a trapper of vankahaar, Punna, a slave girl of a Brahmin, Sumangala mata, born in poor family of Savatthi, Ambapali, a famous courtesan of Vesali, Abhayamata, known as Padumavati a courtesan of Ujjeni are recorded prominent. Buddha consoles bereaved women like Patacara, Vasitthi, Gotamid, Kisa-gotami etc.

From this stand point it is admitted that the approach of his religion is open to all classes of people for the welfare of the society. Buddha maintains social justice everywhere. Buddha personally renders his social service for the sick. On

one occasion, Buddha sees a monk suffering from dysentery and lying in filth. He washes him and changes his bed with the help of disciple Ananda. He advises his disciples to nurse the sick in any situation. Thus Buddha stresses on social service on humanitarian ground.

### III. CONCLUSION

In the modern age man has become alienated from himself and nature. When science started opening new vistas of knowledge revealing the secrets of nature one by one, man gradually lost faith in theistic religions. Consequently, he developed scanty respect for moral and spiritual values as well. Forgetting that he is a part and parcel of nature, he exploits it with unrestrained greed, thus alienating himself from nature as well. The net result is the deterioration of man's physical and mental health on the one hand, and environmental pollution on the other. These results remind us of the Buddhist teachings in the Suttas discussed above, which maintain that the moral degeneration of man leads to the decrease of his life-span and the depletion of natural resources.

In this pitiable condition, Buddhism offers man a simple moderate lifestyle eschewing both extremes of self-deprivation and self-indulgence. Each man has to order his life on normal principles, exercise self-control in the enjoyment of the senses, discharge his duties in his various social roles, and conduct himself with wisdom and self-awareness in all activities. It is only when each man adopts a simple moderate lifestyle that mankind. With such a lifestyle, man will adopt a non-exploitative, non-aggressive, gentle attitude towards life.

It is a fact that all our problems and all our unhappiness are created by our uncontrolled mind and our non-virtuous actions. By engaging in the practice of Dharma, we can learn to pacify and control our mind, abandon non-virtuous actions and their root cause, and thereby attain permanent peace, the true cessation of our suffering.

Again Buddhism also prescribes the practice of *Metta*, "loving-kindness" towards all creatures. Just as one's own life is precious to oneself, so is the life of the other precious to himself. Therefore a reverential attitude must be cultivated towards all forms of life. Ultimately, it can be said that the Buddhism as a human-centered religion, include aiming for emancipation exclusively through the individual's own power. He devoted his entire life to encouraging people through self-discipline and respect for life.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Aiguttara Nikaya vol-1, p 18
- [2] Theragatha- vv 620-621
- [3] Therigatha- vv 23-24
- [4] Vinayapitaka- I,34
- [5] Dhammapada-Atthakatha- III p . 321
- [6] Vinayapitaka IV, 205-206
- [7] Suttanipata, Vasala Sutta.
- [8] Majjhina-Nikaya- I, p 37
- [9] Mahavagga – VI , 31

- [10] Mahāparinibbāna suttā V 23
- [11] Gautama, the Buddha, by Radhakrishnan. .
- [12] Buddhism – the Marxist Approach, Rahul Sankrityayan.
- [13] The Buddha and His Teaching, Nārada thera.
- [14] Dictionary of Pāli proper names, Vol – I –II by G. Malalasekara.
- [15] Robert Arvill, *Man and Environment* (Penguin Books, 1978), p. 118.
- [16] Wilson and Ikeda, *Human Values in a Changing World*, p. 74
- [17] Daisaku Ikeda, "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first-Century Civilization" (Address at Harvard University, Cambridge, Sept. 24, 1993), *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1996), pp. 157-59.
- [18] K. R. Norman, tr., *The Group of Discourses (Suttanipata)* (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 105, 124.
- [19] Daisaku Ikeda, "Creative Life" (Address at Institut de France, Paris, June 14, 1989), *A New Humanism*, p. 8.
- [20] Daisaku Ikeda, "Homage to the Sagarmatha of Humanism: The Living Lessons of Gautama Buddha" (Address at Tribhuvan University, Nepal, on Nov. 2, 1995), *Monthly SGI Newsletter* (No. 152, November 1995 Issue), pp. 16- 17.
- [21] "Buddhism." *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service, 2004).

IJIRAS